

The reported occurrence of Russell's Viper in Sumatra & the Malay Peninsula.

By J. C. MOULTON.

Some 50 years ago Dr. J. Fayrer compiled statistics to show that the death-rate in India from snake-bite amounted to about 20,000 persons per annum. The snakes responsible for this enormous mortality are the Cobra (*Naia naja* = *tripudians*), the Krait (*Bungarus candidus*), the Hamadryad (*Naia bungarus*) and Russell's Viper (*Vipera russelli*), in that order of importance.

In Malaysia three species of Krait are known: the Banded Krait (*Bungarus fasciatus*), the Krait (*B. candidus*), and the Yellow-headed Krait (*B. flaviceps*). All are rare in Malaysia. The Cobra and Hamadryad however are by no means rare in the Malay Peninsula and adjoining Islands. Although records of death from snake-bite in these Malay countries are extremely rare it is generally known that these two snakes are the most dangerous and the most to be feared. Other snakes such as the Coral Snakes and Pit-Vipers in Malaysia are poisonous, although an injection of their poison is not necessarily always fatal.

Russell's Viper, or the Daboia, or Tic Polonga, as it is variously called in India, is particularly deadly, and unfortunately common in many parts of India. Fayrer states that 471 snakes were brought in for record in one day at Amritsar in 1866. Of these over 300 belonged to this one deadly species. E. G. Boulenger states that it is "even more venomous than the majority of Cobras, its bite killing fowls in from thirty seconds to a few minutes, dogs in from ten minutes to four or five hours, and man in under twenty-four hours."

Three recognized authorities in herpetology, Drs. G. A. Boulenger, T. Barbour and Nelly de Rouij have excluded Russell's Viper from the Malay Peninsula or Archipelago. And such I think is the generally accepted opinion. It is therefore somewhat alarming to find the following passage in a book entitled "Reptiles of the World" by Raymond L. Ditmars, Curator of Reptiles and Assistant Curator of Mammals in the New York Zoological Park, published in London 1910:—

"One of the commonest and most deadly snakes of India is a species of *Vipera*. This is *Tic Polonga*, the *Daboia*, or *Russell's Viper*, *V. russellii*, a beautifully-coloured reptile reaching a length of five feet.

"The range of this snake, the largest of the Asiatic vipers, embraces India, Ceylon, Burma, Siam and the Malay Peninsula. My friend, Mr. Rudolf Weber, brought several small specimens of typical coloration from Sumatra, showing the species to occur on at least one of the larger islands."*

E. G. Boulenger (1914) states that:—

"*Russell's viper*, *V. russelli*, or Tic-polonga, as this large and justly dreaded snake is known in Ceylon, is found in hills, as well as in the plains of India, Ceylon, Burma, Siam, and Sumatra."

He based his record as regards Sumatra on the British Museum Catalogue, but in a letter to me dated 20th June, 1921, Mr. Boulenger agrees now that this may be regarded as a mistake.

In spite of this very definite assertion by Ditmars I felt that the discovery of Russell's Viper in Sumatra was so remarkable that it was worth while making some inquiries in order to obtain confirmation of this interesting record.

My friend Dr. T. Barbour of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Cambridge, Mass., at my request interested himself in the matter and ascertained from Mr. Ditmars himself the following particulars about Mr. Weber and his Sumatran collections. Dr. Barbour writes:—

"It seems that between 1892 to 1898 he (Mr. Rudolf Weber) was employed as an artist to illustrate publications of the Museum of Natural History in New York. During the latter part of this period he went on a scientific mission to Sumatra, but Ditmars informs me that now he thinks of it, that all of Weber's reptiles were dumped into large jars and remained lying about the Museum uncared for many years." Dr. Barbour concludes that "there is absolutely no reason whatever to suppose that Weber did not collect these creatures in India while he was passing through en route to Sumatra."

The specimens are not to be found in the New York Museum now.

In the British Museum Catalogue of Snakes, the locality for one specimen in that Museum is "? Sumatra." In the British Museum Hand-list of Snakes the distribution is given as "India, Burma and Siam; Java and Sumatra ?"

In the light of the above I think one must look with considerable suspicion on the definite assertions by Ditmars and E. G. Boulenger as to its positive occurrence in Sumatra. Dr. Malcolm Smith gives Bangkok as the southernmost locality for it in Siam, and that I think must be regarded, at present, as the nearest point to the Malaysian sub-region, this deadly snake has yet reached.

* The italics are mine. J. C. M.